Kamen Rider

A Monstrous Hero

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Articles

2021 is the fiftieth anniversary year for Japanese live-action superhero franchise *Kamen Rider.* For half a century, heroes bearing the name Kamen Rider have battled rubber suited monsters and defended the smiles of children. Unlike many superheroes, however, the Kamen Riders are grotesque heroes, usually drawing their powers from the same source as the villains they battle. Grotesque human-machine-animal hybrids, they differ from their opponents only in the kindness of their hearts and the strength of their spirits. Although the *Kamen Rider* franchise includes a variety of texts including manga, novels, movies, and stage musicals, the central text is the Sunday morning children's television program. This article focusses exclusively on the television series. Each season of the television program is comprised of around fifty twenty-five-minute episodes, and each season features an entirely new cast, title, and premise.

Kamen Rider was originally created at a time of economic downturn and social unrest, and the unease of the zeitgeist is reflected in the figure of the no longer human hero. A little over thirty years later Japan was again facing a variety of crises and intense debate over what, if any, role it should play in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 2002 television season, *Kamen Rider Ryūki,* tackles difficult questions about what justice, heroism, and monstrosity mean, through the medium of a children's martial arts and live action special effects hero television program. This article explores the blurred boundaries between monster and hero in *Kamen Rider,* in the context of social attitudes toward children.

The First Kamen Rider

The inaugural Kamen Rider (protagonist of the 1971 television season), Hongo Takeshi, is a university student who gains superpowers after being abducted and experimented on by Shocker, a terrorist organisation founded by Nazis. Their medical experiments are part of a plan to produce an army capable of world domination. Takeshi's body was modified with grasshopper DNA and cybernetic enhancements, but he was able to escape before the mind control portion of the operation. Although he appears human, Takeshi transforms via a special belt into Kamen (masked) Rider in order to fight. His face is obscured by an insectoid helmet with red compound eyes and antennae. The transformation scene is a highlight of every episode, and the transformation belt is the most important of the (many) tie-in toys. The primary audience of *Kamen Rider* is children between two and seven, and as a media-mix (Steinberg) franchise the sale of toys and branded products to the primary audience is vital. Anne Allison (105) identifies the transformation and blending or crossing of bodily borders it entails as the "money shot" children anticipate and enjoy. There is also a substantial tertiary audience, however, which includes older children and adults.

During the early 1970s, when the first few seasons of *Kamen Rider* were broadcast, 'employment trains' were transporting Japanese teenagers (immediately following their graduation from middle school) from rural areas to the large cities, where they worked in factories and construction far from their families (Alt 54). *Kamen Rider*'s creator, Ishinomori Shōtarō, had debuted as a manga artist while still in school himself, and his works were particularly popular among this disenfranchised demographic. The figure of a young man taken and changed against his will and left to forge his own path in the aftermath may have been particularly resonant with these teenagers.

Kamen Rider's creator, Ishinomori Shōtarō, was a member of the *yakeato* (burnt ruins) generation, who were children during the Second World War and experienced the fire- and nuclear bombings of Japan and grew up amidst the burned-out ruins. Roman Rosenbaum (*Redacting* 97-98) argues that this generation (or perhaps more accurately, micro-generation), "later subconsciously released the bent-up trauma of their early childhood experiences throughout their adult lives in their body of work". Ishinomori was not alone in this experience, of course; other members of the early *Kamen Rider* creative team were also motivated by childhood trauma. Hirayama Tōru, who helped Ishinomori bring the Rider concept to television as a producer, was sixteen when his hometown of Nagoya was firebombed. He and other schoolboys were dispatched to dispose of the bodies of civilians who had died while trying to escape the flames only to die in the river (Oda and Muraeda 41-2). Members of the *yakeato* generation were prominent in anti-war activism during the 1970s, opposing Japan's entanglement in the Vietnam War (Rosenbaum *Generation* 284). Violence and the meaning of justice were urgent issues for this generation.

This first season of *Kamen Rider,* along with many of the subsequent seasons, is classifiable as a horror text, with numerous Gothic elements (Staite). Many of the monsters Takeshi battles are "designed to elicit a specific reaction: that of abject horror" (Kim 28). While some of the prosthetic suits are quite silly-looking by contemporary standards, many remain compellingly disturbing in their fusion of animal-human-machine. Although he proceeds up the chain of command to eventually battle the leaders of Shocker, Takeshi is always aware when battling other victims of Shocker experimentation that the only difference between himself and them is that he was able to escape before losing his will. He, like them, is no longer entirely human, and has become as grotesque as the unfortunate monsters he must defeat. As Miura Shion (180) puts it (translation mine), "Kamen Rider was originally an entity created by evil. The reality is that the enemy in front of you and you are actually the same. The fate of Kamen Rider is to fight while struggling with this". Noting that *Kamen Rider* was created during a time of social, economic, and political upheaval in Japan, Hirofumi Katsuno (37-38) links the rise of the ambiguous hero to the decline of the 'grand narrative' of modernity and the belief in the kind of absolute justice represented by more traditional superheroes. *Kamen Rider* instead inhabits "an ambiguous space between human and nonhuman, good and evil" (Katsuno 44).

In the early years of the franchise the ambiguity remained largely centred on the figure of the hero. Members of the opposing Shocker organisation – who were responsible for the rise of the first two Kamen Riders – are unambiguously evil and unsympathetic. For ordinary people who have been subjected to mind control and experimentation there is compassion, but in terms of the central conflict there is no question that destroying Shocker is correct and moral. The villains battled by Kamen Riders remained predominantly fascists and cultists bent on world domination until the late 1980s, with the primary antagonist of 1987 season *Kamen Rider Black* the protagonist's beloved brother. The following season, *Kamen Rider Black RX,* had environmental themes. The villains trying to take over the world in this season are doing so because their own planet has become too polluted to sustain life. They argue, somewhat persuasively, that since humans are on the path to global environmental destruction they are justified in taking over the planet before it is ruined. This gradual shift toward more sympathetic monsters became explicit in 2002 with *Kamen Rider Ryūki*'s ambivalent response to the Bush administration's so-called War on Terror.

Justice Is a Thing with Teeth and Claws

Kamen Rider Ryūki (hereafter *Ryūki*) was in the planning stages when the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, destroying the twin towers. TV Asahi, the station that airs *Kamen Rider,* immediately sent a directive to producer Shirakura Shinichiro stating that "now more than ever we must teach children about justice" (Salas). Seemingly uncomfortable with the implications of this idea of "justice" in light of the Bush administration's subsequent actions, Shirakura says:

> in that mood I wondered if I could repeat the sort of hero story we had made so far, where the 'good person' beats the 'bad person' that appears one after another and finally hits the headquarters of evil. It is very dangerous to plant the mentality of the Cold War era in children at this time. 'Ryuuki' was created in the hope that children will have an eye for what justice means. (Cited in Uno 261-2, translation mine)

Since its creation in the 1970s, *Kamen Rider* had been forging a new path for Japanese heroes in opposition to what Jonathan Abel identifies as an external attitude to justice in the hero programs of the 1950s and 1960s. In these programs, he argues, justice was represented as

something imposed into Japan from outside (by alien superheroes, for example, or the Allied Occupation forces). American superheroes and their various approaches to questions of justice and vigilantism were also well known in Japan, as Timothy Peters has highlighted.

In its depiction of a hero so closely resembling the monsters he battles, *Kamen Rider* rejected notions of an absolute distinction between the categories of hero and monster. As Katsuno (46) argues, "in this postmodern, liquid society, superheroes lack a unified, self-evident justice, but must navigate multiple conceptions of justice … . As embodiments of relativized justice, these grotesque heroes were the seeds for what have become enduring trends in Japanese popular culture". 2002 season *Ryūki* takes the idea of relativised justice to its extreme, questioning the very existence of a 'justice' that exists independently from the people it impacts.

It is impossible to summarise the plot of *Ryūki* both briefly and accurately; this attempt prioritises the former over the latter. *Ryūki* features thirteen Kamen Riders in a battle royale, competing for the granting of a single wish. The Riders gain their powers through forming a contract with a mirror monster, who they must feed by defeating other Riders or less powerful mirror monsters (who are themselves feeding on helpless humans). If a Rider is defeated and can no longer feed his contract monster, the creature will consume them. Mirror monsters are so called because they come from mirror world, a parallel dimension connected to ours by reflective surfaces including mirrors and, significantly, gleaming skyscrapers. The battle is controlled by antagonist Kanzaki Shiro, who is trying to save the life of his younger sister Yui. Protagonist Kido Shinji tries to stop the Riders from fighting one another, which delays Shiro's plans and leads to Yui's death. Shiro repeatedly loops time to restart the battle and save Yui, but Shinji disrupts each new timeline.

There are multiple alternate endings to the story, including both televisual and print versions. Because the endings each involve uncovering the reason Shiro has created the battle as part of their resolution of the story, there are also multiple explanations for why and how the battle began. In some versions the origin of the mirror monsters lies in Shiro and Yui's childhood experience of abuse at the hands of their parents, while in another Shinji inadvertently sets events in motion after breaking a childhood promise to Yui. Which origin, ending, or time-loop is 'true' is never resolved. Viewers were invited to vote on the ending of the television special by telephone; alternate endings had been prepared with the winning option inserted at the end of the broadcast (Uno 271).

This moral ambiguity and confusion over what is 'true' is an intentional critique of simplistic ideas about justice. In *Ryūki* each of the Riders participates in the battle because they believe that their wish is important enough to justify the means employed to obtain it. The program problematises the idea that there is an objective division between good and evil by focusing on the subjective righteousness of the individual characters' motivations, including the irony of Shinji's battles for the sake of stopping the war. Although these feel like quite adult themes, Shirakura couches them firmly within his interpretation of teaching children about justice, explaining that

> children sometimes envision themselves as the heroes and think they might also be justice. There is also the idea that people often don't accept themselves as being wrong, because in one's mind 'I am myself, so I'm not wrong' is the prevailing thought process. These thoughts lead to selfish patterns because kids might not see themselves as themselves but as the heroes. (Salas)

Uno Tsunehiro (263-4) argues that there is in fact no villain and no justice in *Ryūki*, simply competing desires. *Ryūki* does not make judgements about which desires are more or less worthy, he writes, but displays all of the Riders' motivations equally, just like Google search results of products displayed on Amazon. Just like Capitalism, Uno (263-4) suggests, *Ryūki* treats every story (justice / evil) equally as a desire (as a product).

The mirror monsters are quite frightening; using a combination of *Godzilla*-style rubber suits and CGI they are all based on animals including spiders, crabs, and cobras, combined with cyborg elements such as guns embedded in various body parts. However, their behaviour is straightforwardly animalistic. They are hungry; they kill to feed. The truly monstrous characters in *Ryūki* are clearly the Kamen Riders themselves, who use the mirror monsters to lend power to human motivations that are far more complex and twisted. Although many of the Riders have sympathetic motivations such as saving the life of a loved one, Kamen Rider Ōja simply enjoys violence. Uno points out that this character is essentially the same as The Joker in 2008's *The Dark Knight;* like The Joker, Ōja tells a variety of stories explaining the origins of his psychopathy in past traumas only to mock the credulity of those so eager to believe these explanations (Uno 274). Crucially, Ōja is still a Kamen Rider, and appears alongside more sympathetic Kamen Riders in ensemble-cast films and games. The line between hero and monster has become blurred beyond comprehension.

Monsters for Children, Children as Monsters

Shirakura's comment about the danger of children uncritically viewing their own actions as being just draws attention to an important shift taking place at the turn of the millennium. Monsters were no longer something to protect children from, but increasingly children themselves were becoming viewed as potentially monstrous. Five years before *Ryūki*'s release Japan had been rocked by the discovery that the murderer of two elementary school children was a fourteen-year-old child dubbed 'Youth A', who had described his behaviour as a game, taunting the police and media before his capture (Arai 370-1). Although violent crimes perpetrated by children are always shocking, what stands out from this particular incident is the response from other school children. Youth A had sent a manifesto to a local newspaper lambasting the education system that had created him. In a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education more than fifty percent of the students surveyed sympathised and identified with at Youth A (cited in Arai 371).

Lindsay Nelson (4) notes the prevalence of child-monsters in Japanese horror films in the late 1990s and early 2000s, writing that "the many monstrous children of contemporary Japanese cinema stand at a crossroads of Japan's past, present, and future, crying out for compassion even as they drag those around them into death" (Nelson 13). There is of course a world of difference between depictions of monstrous children in adult media, and depictions of monsters in children's media. I do not mean to conflate or confuse the two. Both kinds of monsters are, however, influenced and in turn influence wider social discourses and anxieties. *Kamen Rider* is also a text characterised by dual address, a narrative mode which addresses both adults and children simultaneously (in contradistinction to double address, in which the adults talk over the heads of children in an exclusionary way (Wall).

Although *Kamen Rider Ryūki* featured adult actors (teenagers began to appear in leading roles with increasing frequency from the mid-2000s), it foreshadows the shifting of social attitudes toward children through intertextual references to the film *Battle Royale* (2000), also distributed by *Kamen Rider*'s producer Toei. *Battle Royale* centres on a school class who have (without their

prior knowledge) been selected by lottery to participate in a 'survival game' on an isolated island. They must kill one another until only one survives; they have all been fitted with explosive collars, and any child refusing to participate will have their collar remotely detonated, killing them.

Director Fukasaku Kinji comments that he felt a connection to the thematic linking of violence and children in *Battle Royale* because of his own experiences as a member of the *yakeato* generation. He had worked in a munitions factory during the war that was frequently targeted by bombs, and he describes hiding under and later having to dispose of the bodies of his friends (Rose). The story is a biting commentary of the relationship between economic collapse, school-based violence, and failures of governance. In Andrea Arai's (368) analysis, "the tropes of battle, survival, and the figure of the schoolchild, reflect and refract social anxieties about the Japanese future in an era of globalisation and neoliberal reform, and the enduring historical conundrums of Japan's twentieth-century past". The battle between Kamen Riders in *Ryūki* is also a battle royale; although the core audience of very young children would probably not have made the intertextual link to the film (or the 1999 novel the film was based on), the association would have been strengthened for older viewers by the use of "those who don't fight won't survive!" as a catchphrase for *Kamen Rider Ryūki.*

Conclusion

In the early 1970s, *Kamen Rider* stood out as a text rejecting externally imposed, objective ideas of justice enforced by unassailable virtue, in favour of a grotesque hero struggling to find a path to justice through a metaphorical forest of misadventure and victimisation. The first Kamen Rider was a grotesque, damaged hero who fought monsters to whom he was more alike than different. In the early 2000s this blurring of the heroic and monstrous was taken even further, questioning the very concepts of justice and monstrosity. Much as the original season of *Kamen Rider* responded to economic and social upheavals with its reassessment of the role and figure of the hero, *Kamen Rider Ryūki* draws attention to fears of and for its child audience in response to both domestic economic disaster and global events. In *Kamen Rider Ryūki* the trope of an unwitting victim being turned into a Kamen Rider through biomechanical enhancements is discarded entirely; anyone can become a Kamen Rider simply by entering into a contract with a mirror monster. No longer grotesque because of powers beyond their control, the new generation of Kamen Riders choose grotesquery and risk their lives to obtain their desire. Anyone can become a hero, *Ryūki* tells its viewers, and anyone can become a monster. And, perhaps, anyone can be both at the same time.

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